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ARTEFACTS AND THE MEANING OF THINGS

Daniel Miller

INTRODUCTION

Imagine we decide to establish a museum of contemporary material culture in order to preserve for posterity the artefacts of today. A comprehensive collecting policy is intended. It will not be very long before the farcical nature of this scheme becomes apparent. Some things, such as houses and ships, are too big, some things, such as candy floss and daisy chains, too ephemeral. Is a softwood plantation a natural or an artefactual form? Do we start with industrially produced goods and, if so, do we include every brand of car door mirrors and shampoo, and if a company proclaims a change in the product is this a new artefact or not? What about self-made artefacts, those that children have made at school, or that individuals have knitted on the bus? Clearly we cannot create such a museum, although we may observe the extraordinary variety of exhibitions that might be put on, featuring collections of anything from matchboxes to garden gnomes.

To acknowledge the problems faced by such a proposal, however, is liable to produce a rather uneasy feeling that we live in a world that has gone beyond our capacities of ordering. As Simmel (1968:43–4) argued at the turn of the century, to be continually faced with objects which we cannot assimilate is one of the key problems of the modern age. We constantly strive for such assimilation. That is, artefacts appear as given concrete forms, but human societies have always striven—through their construction, alteration, consumption and application of meaning—to make them internal to, and in part definitional of, themselves. In many ways it is the very physical nature of artefacts, at once the product of human desires, yet in themselves inanimate, which will always render them ambiguous as regards the dualism between persons and non-persons. It is intrinsic to their nature as social things.

This problem has constituted a kind of meta-context for the study of

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anthropology. Anthropologists have generally come from societies which are experiencing a massive increase in the quantity of material culture, whether these societies are industrial nations or developing countries with rapidly increasing importation of consumer goods in exchange for primary products. The general sense of an infinitude of new varieties of things and the new flux of fashion and transience may itself be the prime source of this feeling that artefacts are threatening to us. There is a continual unease about being what is colloquially termed 'materialistic'. An underlying question has therefore been to understand the manner by which persons come to identify with objects or even to become undifferentiated from them.

When the phrase the 'meaning of things' is used in anthropology it tends to implicate something beyond the narrow questions of semanticity by which artefacts, like words, might have sense and reference. Rather, the notion of meaning tends to incorporate a sense of 'meaningful' closer to the term 'significance'. When we think of buildings, foods, clothes and other artefacts we automatically concern ourselves with meaning in the sense of asking what does this building or drink mean to us and for us? Is this an artefact I identify with as conforming to my 'taste' or 'style', or do I think of it as relating primarily to some other person or group? Is it a suitable present for…, is it a suitable environment to be inhabited by…, is it an appropriate symbol of…? And so forth. Artefacts are very different from words, and when we talk about the meaning of things we are primarily concerned with questions of 'being' rather than questions of 'reference'. Artefacts are a means by which we give form to, and come to an understanding of, ourselves, others, or abstractions such as the nation or the modern. It is in this broad sense that their very materiality becomes problematic, and it is this problematic which I shall take as the central theme of this article.

This point is not always acknowledged in anthropology, since the primary concern has tended to be with the meaning of artefacts for others, in particular for those living in relatively small-scale communities with a relatively limited and clearly defined array of artefacts. But here, as in so much of anthropology, the very interest in what have tended to be presented as small, closed systems can be fully understood only in relation to, and often in contrast with, the preoccupations of the societies from which the anthropologists have come and for whom they write, societies in which simplicity in the relation to objects is consigned to remote places or far-off times. Therefore, to understand the meaning of things for anthropology, both ends of this polarity have to be considered. On the one hand anthropologists can call on their experience of living and participating in small communities, where to study the meaning of things is almost always to assume that such artefacts are 'full' of meaning, often integrating various otherwise disparate elements of cultural life. On the other hand all contemporary anthropologists, as members of their own societies, also relate to objects, for example by going shopping. Whether selecting car seat covers, ice cream flavours or a new novel to read, we are constantly aware that

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the choice threatens to be problematic, that we might find ourselves delaying others as we strive internally torn between choices on a menu. The problem lies less in the time expended than in the awareness that it is very hard to justify, to find criteria which would lend importance to such decisions and therefore make sense of this activity as a substantial element in our lives. We feel that to be unable to choose the appropriate birthday card in a shop is symptomatic of a new banality. Modern mass material culture has made us all feel silly at different times, and it is this which makes the study of material culture such a serious pursuit.

The concept of the artefact is best defined in the broadest terms. There is little point in attempting to distinguish systematically between a natural world and an artefactual one, except when we are concerned with the ways in which terms such as 'natural' may have particular consequences or entailments, as when a commodity in the shops is labelled 'natural' simply because a single ingredient, such as a chemical dye, has been deleted, or when something as apparently natural as radiation is taken to be antithetical to true 'nature'. It is not only in industrial societies that virtually all objects encountered are artefactual. If we remove ourselves to the South Pacific, for example to a Polynesian outlier within the Solomon Islands, then at first glance we might seem to encounter a dense natural forest environment within which villages represent clearings. This, however, would be to ignore the highly developed arboriculture which over several centuries has removed virtually all trees which are not of direct economic value to the inhabitants, to leave an environment which is in fact entirely the product of cultivation. Plants and animals are natural species, but is not a lap-dog produced by selective breeding over generations an animated artefact—still more a bonsai tree? Even when it comes to those objects such as the sea or snow which we do not control, we still interact with them as classified and therefore structured sets of forms, which are experienced through such human ordering. Snow for the Inuit out hunting is only in the most trivial sense the same thing as snow experienced by a London youth at Christmas.

It would be similarly pointless to attempt to define material culture as the outcome of specific desires or to differentiate the products of intention from those of history—artefacts which are made deliberately as opposed to those which come down to us as given forms. Since intentions themselves have their source in subjects who are inevitably situated historically, the argument would always tend to circularity, because we would find that the artefacts we have received in turn influence the artefacts we choose to make. Few contemporary inhabitants of Sweden wear the clothes fashionable in the eighteenth century, but this is not the result of some calculative decision. The micro-element of conscious decision between perceived possibilities can be attributed to intentionality, but the alternatives from which we choose, and the strategies which inform our taste in objects, are usually derived from larger historical forces.

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If material culture is not defined in relation to its artificiality or intentionality, what alternative basis can be found? It seems most reasonable to take it as a subset of culture, so that a theory of artefacts as material culture would be derived from a more general theory of culture. If culture is understood not in the narrow sense of some particular element of the human environment, but in the more general sense of the process through which human groups construct themselves and are socialized, then material culture becomes an aspect of objectification, consisting in the material forms taken by this cultural process. Hence to study material culture is to consider the implications of the materiality of form for the cultural process.

This sense of material culture as a form of being-in-the-world becomes clearer when we consider the process of socialization. From quite early on, the infant born in one cultural context becomes recognizably distinct in manners and outlook from an infant socialized in another setting. Much of this results from the micro-routines of daily life, in which we become oriented to and by the spaces, the objects and the small but significant distinctions in object forms through which we form our classifications and habits. In turn these create our expectations, which allow much of the world to become quickly absorbed as a 'taken-for-granted' context for our lives. In this sense our cultural identity is not merely embodied but literally 'objectified' (Bourdieu 1977).

This suggests a starting point for examining the cultural process, which lies in the manner by which we order things and are ordered by things. Subsequently two further problems arise: first, the implications of the very materiality of things, and second, the dualism by which we tend to think of things as being opposed to persons.

THE ORDER OF THINGS (1): ORDERING THINGS

In this section my central concern is both with elucidating dominant principles by which arrays of artefacts are ordered and with showing how these are derived by means of different methodologies developed for the study of material culture. Both historians and anthropologists have argued that particular societies or particular historical periods have tended to emphasize particular principles of classification. Foucault, for example, divides European history into separate 'epistemes' based on the dominant principle of classification employed in each. He argues that with the rise of natural history, sight became dominant over smell and touch (1970:132–3), while forms of resemblance and affinity were similarly demoted as against other principles of order. With the rise of the sciences it was not enough to assume that a root which happened to have a shape reminiscent of the human body was therefore likely, when eaten, to have an effect upon the body. Rather, from systematic collections of natural objects, such as butterflies or rock forms, patterns of affinity were sought which could then be analysed in conjunction with consistent theories of their connectivity.

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The order of things is also culturally constructed. Strathern (1988:268–305) has argued that in traditional Melanesian societies transformative principles are stressed, rather than those of either affinity or theory. An object is always perceived in terms of its ability to transform into or elicit another object: a tool is the potential creator of garden crops, a boy is a potential man, a shell necklace may attract another form of valuable. Objects are thus viewed less in themselves than for their place in an exchange or ritual which will have an effect. In some cases it is forbidden to eat or consume that which you have yourself produced, because to do so prevents the object from becoming part of an exchange (e.g. Munn 1986:49–60) or some other process through which it may act on the world in a transformative capacity. Hence one's sense of any given thing is one in which other things are always implicated.

When we set out to represent a set of objects, the dimensions by which an order is constructed either explicitly or implicitly give meaning to the array of forms. In nineteenth-century museums, for example, objects such as musical instruments or arrows were often organized into a sequence from the most simple to the most sophisticated. What was illustrated, but equally taken as 'demonstrated', was the sense in which material culture has 'evolved' from primitive forms to the refinements of advanced civilization by direct analogy with what were assumed to be the principles of biological science. Ethnographers might then search for the 'missing link' in the guise of some tribal form which would show how one stage in this process gave way to the next (Steadman 1979:74–102). This principle, by which museums tend to reflect wider changes in attitudes towards classification, continues to operate today. In the 1980s, when the desire for the holistic emerged with new force in areas as diverse as alternative medicine and 'whole' foods sold in the supermarket, an ethnographic exhibition of, for example, South Asian peasant life would have attempted to provide an image of the village as it was lived in, allowing the visitor almost to breathe the dust and smell the odours which belonged to the original context of the artefacts displayed (though it was the smell of spices rather than that of urine or garbage which seemed to survive this change of setting). Often, virtually all the detailed labelling characteristic of earlier exhibition forms was removed, so as to leave no barrier to the sense of entering into a whole and natural social environment.

If the meaning of objects derives from the orders into which they are incorporated, then the same artefact may change its implications simply by being introduced into some new order. Gilsenan (1982:192–214) writes about the construction of old towns or the old quarters of towns in the Middle East which are often visited today by tourists who view them as picturesque remains. Clearly at one time such areas were themselves new, and for a long period they were merely the ordinary form of urban environment, but once the point is reached at which much of the rest of the town has been rebuilt in a new style, the remaining areas may be redesignated as the 'old' city and gain thereby an aura of being quaint or traditional, the ideal haunt for tourists: a dark, obscure

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and fossilized form. This is not, as some have assumed, a new type of change. A very similar process occurred two millennia earlier when the same areas with which Gilsensan is concerned were Hellenized or Romanized. As with modern colonialism, the Greek sector of the city may well have appeared modern and as the inevitable outcome of historical change which rendered the original, non-Hellenized sector of, for example, Jerusalem quaint, barbaric or merely scruffy.

At least one major paradigm in anthropology, that of structuralism, has made the ordering of things central to its understanding of human culture. Although the 'things' in question were often non-material, such as myths or kinship rules, structuralist studies of the internal logic of symbolic systems—linked as they were to semiotic studies of the relations between symbols and their external referents—led to many refinements in the study of cultures as cosmologies whose sense of order and integrity emerged in large part through the logical ordering of concrete objects. Two examples may serve as illustrations. The first is Lévi-Strauss's own study (1982:93) of the masks used by the Indians of the American Northwest Coast, in which these figure as material equivalents of myths. Like myths, they would undergo inversion, either in their physical attributes or in the symbolic interpretation of their material form, at the boundaries between different tribal groups. Thus the Xwexwe mask of the Kwakiutl, with its bulging eyes, protruding jaws and tongue, is the inverse transformation of their Dzonkwa mask, which has sunken eyes, hollow cheeks, and no tongue, but is the same as the mask called Swaihwe of the neighbouring Salish. Here the objects of one society are seen to derive their meanings not only from their relations of opposition one with another, but from the ways in which this system of relations undergoes partial inversion as it crosses the boundaries with neighbouring societies. It is as though the meanings of British foods only become clear when they are seen as systematic inversions of French culinary symbolism.

While anthropological structuralism was much influenced by the linguistic theory of de Saussure, many other studies of the order embodied in artefacts were inspired by the subsequent and equally influential linguistics of Chomsky (e.g. Paris 1972). In Chomsky's 'generative grammars' we were able to see how systems of rules which are never explicit are applied through language to determine what combinations of sounds form meaningful sequences rather than unintelligible juxtapositions. Each grammar is specific to a particular group of speakers.

For my second illustrative example I draw on the work of Classic (1975), who has applied similar ideas to a study of historical folk housing in Middle Virginia. Noting the repetition in geometric form and combinations of elements, Classic argues that rules are being systematically applied. As with language, these are not conscious, and there are no professional architects. Rather, these 'rules' determined the normative order which generated buildings with which the people of the time felt comfortable, and which were acceptable in their general aesthetics. Overall, he argues that nine subdivided

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rule-sets can account for the generation of all the culturally acceptable vernacular buildings that are found. These include such micro-elements as 'fenestration of the façade' or 'the fireplace must be central to the wall on which it is located' (Classic 1975:29). The analysis is a dynamic one which reveals how, around the middle of the eighteenth century, a major change occurred by which chimneys and central halls became incorporated into the main building, and a new concern with symmetry appeared along with a homogenization of the exterior around a more conspicuously ordered façade associated with the Georgian style. (For another perspective on Glassie's work, see Wynn's discussion in this volume, Article 6.)

This historical study may be brought up to date by ethnographic work being carried out in the nearby area of coastal North Carolina (Forrest 1988, especially 192–203). As in other recent studies, the tendency has been to move away from the tight and rather formal methods of strict structural analysis and to allow a more flexible, contextual and interpretive dimension, while still examining patterns which link different sets of artefacts. In this case the aesthetics of house outlines are linked to interior decoration, including items such as quilts or the recipes used for home cooking. The aesthetics of the home interior are compared with the decoration of the church and contrasted to objects used outside the home and associated with men, such as the duck decoys used in sports. The ethnography allows the physical and spatial forms to be presented in the context of the aesthetics of smell and taste, and of more general sensual appreciation. An overall 'message' is seen to emerge consistent with the more explicit messages of the church. This is directed particularly to men, who, after spending much of their life outside the home milieu, often working at some distance from the community and associated with a more material-transactional ethos, are then encouraged to return to the fold of religion and domestic life as reflected in a more incorporative aesthetic and practice. At this stage, however, we have moved from a focus on the ordering of things to the manner by which we might be said to be ordered by things.

THE ORDER OF THINGS (2): ORDERED BY THINGS

In the above studies the patterning found in material culture is essentially a reflection of a dominant mode of classification imposed either by the anthropologist as analyst or by the group being studied (in practice, usually some amalgamation of the two). The other side of the coin, however, lies in the impact the taxonomic order of things has upon those who are socialized into that environment. The original Portuguese title of Gilberto Freyre's classic work on the early development of Brazilian society is *Casa-Grande e Senzala*—that is, *The Big House and the Slave Quarters*. Within this work the author constantly attempts to evoke the manner by which social relations are established by reference to this spatial context, the setting for a sensual and languid life in the hammock, where to have to use one's legs was to risk a

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degrading comparison with slaves and plebeians (Freyre 1986:429). The development of particular behaviours in relation to sexuality and sadism is closely tied to the way their normality is enshrined in a spatial nexus defined by the architectural forms and the institutions they represented and literally channelled into particular relations.

There has recently been a return to this kind of more impressionistic anthropology in which such material paraphernalia as clothing forms or baroque façades are understood as core elements in evoking a sense of 'atmosphere' in which certain social relations and activities develop and become normative. In industrial societies commercial classifications often clarify such relations. Objects made by the London-based firm Heal's in the late nineteenth century clearly constructed systematic stylistic distinctions contrasting the furnishing appropriate for servants against that appropriate for the mistress (Forty 1986:85). This distinction was given symbolic form in every decorative detail and may be set alongside that ubiquitous Victorian phrase of people 'knowing their place'. Forty (1986:156–81) examines the development of concepts of hygiene and cleanliness, and activities such as constant dusting, promoted on the grounds of their being based on important discoveries in medical science but then elevated to something rather more in the formation of the modern role of the housewife. 'Disorder and lack of cleanliness should cause a sort of suffering in the mistress of the house. Put in these terms the condition of total cleanliness was comparable to a religious state of grace, and just as unattainable' (1986:169). The decline in this obsession with dusting has not led to a perceptible rise in poor health, but the point made by Forty is not just that the concept of cleanliness was central to changes in gender relations but that it was literally enshrined in a wide array of new furnishing forms, colours, textures and designs which constituted the acceptable standard of interior decoration. Cleanliness was transformed into beauty.

In some societies such ordering principles appear to be all-encompassing. South Asian caste society is usually described not only as hierarchically ordered by caste but also as deriving all forms of classification from hierarchy, so that even different woods or metals are seen as high or low. All object and material classifications evoke social distinctions, such that aluminium vessels are seen as more suitable for lower-caste use than brass vessels, one wood is more appropriate to high-caste ritual use than another, and so forth. It is commonly argued that to be brought up in such an environment, in which all things declare the ubiquity of a particular ordering principle, will result in a perception of the world which takes this principle as second nature, close to the concept of habit, an order accepted without any conscious thought or consideration as to the way things might otherwise be. Many of those authors who have concentrated on the place of material culture in socialization have tended to emphasize the way in which ordinary objects can have this effect without appearing to do so (e.g. Bourdieu 1977). However, recent work (see the example from Trinidad on p. 414) suggests that we have tended to exaggerate

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the homogeneity of such meaning, and to ignore the degree of contradiction and ambivalence.

The effect of artefacts in creating a taken-for-granted meaning which is thereby less likely to be challenged than a more explicit set of principles has come under recent scrutiny with the impact of feminism. A vast number of ordinary commercial objects are 'gendered' according to what appear to be consistent patterns. For example, where objects are destined for males it is more likely that the machine parts will be exposed to view. When typewriters switched from being mainly associated with male clerks to being used largely by female secretaries the keys were enclosed; likewise when the motor scooter was developed as a female equivalent to the male motorbike it not only enclosed the engine but took its lines from the familiar children's scooter (Hebdige 1988:84). Although individual instances of such practices are easy to locate, as in the dichotomy between playing with dolls and trains, it is the overwhelming ubiquity of this trend and the realization that there are many other more subtle manifestations of distinction which frustrate those who desire to end what is regarded as an asymmetrical division. The debate is complicated by the sense of deliberate commercial involvement in creating meanings as images for artefacts in a world of commodities, and by the existence of professionals such as advertisers whose job it is to give meaning to artefacts. It gives rise to the question, however, as to how this situation may be compared with instances from non-industrial societies where similar symbolic schemes operate to 'gender' village material culture without deliberate recourse to any such mechanisms.

From here it is a small step to the study of ideology using material culture (Larrain 1979, Miller and Tilley 1984). This tends to be based upon two assumptions. The first is that certain interest groups in a society have more influence to create the world of artefacts in such a manner that they embody the ordering principles established by those same interests. The second is that people who are brought up surrounded by artefacts which embody such ordering principles will tend to understand the world in accordance with this order, with the result that dominated groups will tend to have some difficulty in understanding the nature of their own interests, since these are not given concrete form in the world they inhabit. Since higher-caste Indians dominate the spatial order of villages and the forms of village goods, these spatial orders and material forms will embody a caste view of the world which reproduces the interests of these same higher castes. This view of ideology as misrecognition or false consciousness has certainly been challenged, but central to its credibility is the notion that ordinary artefacts have a considerable impact in ordering people. It may be noted that this approach does not presuppose deliberate manipulation by dominant groups, merely that those with power will anyway tend to construct the world according to the perspectives from which they view it.

What are the implications for groups of people who are living within a world which largely manifests the ideals and values of others? For anthropologists this

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question presents itself most acutely in terms of a fragmentation of what had previously appeared as a relatively simple opposition between *our* kinds of material culture and *theirs,* which I introduced at the beginning of this article. In the contemporary world, the ethnographer who travels to highland New Guinea or goes to study shamans in Brazil is likely to have the uncomfortable experience of finding people who will ask questions about the latest shifts in popular music styles or the characters of a soap opera on national television. The study of material culture today takes place under conditions in which multinational firms have a presence in virtually every country, and where the same chocolate milk drink, brand of blue jeans, paper-back books, gift perfumes and videos are readily available. Once again people who did not initially see material culture as of primary importance are faced with such overwhelming visible changes that certain questions simply force themselves into the foreground. If these are the material forms being employed today, at the very least the problem arises of whether it makes any difference to *this* kinship system if the dowry has to include a fridge, or to *that* ritual if a plastic doll figures in it prominently. More importantly for the study of the significance of image construction, what are the implications of photography or film, which as a medium allows ordinary villagers access to visual images which had previously been reserved for deities? Finally, does a quantitative increase in material culture bring about a qualitative change for the society concerned?

The initial reaction to these changes has tended to be to see them as the harbinger of the end of anthropology as we have known it, since they spell the end of the simple or isolated society, and the end of the authentic 'unspoiled' humanity which for so long has provided a foil for the industrial world. Homogenization of material culture is thus taken as symptomatic of the homogenization of culture itself. This process is often called Americanization, since the United States is viewed as a symbol for mass consumption in general. Similarly the quantitative increase in goods is taken to represent an immediate fall into alienation, and the ensuing problems are generalized as those of 'modernity'. Furthermore, since these goods are made in metropolitan societies by multinational corporations, their spread is assumed to be tantamount to a form of actual control over the peoples who now become subject to the goods and thus subservient to the values and authorities from which they emanate. Yet, in recent years, anthropologists have increasingly realized that the societies represented in their ethnographies were never so isolated, ahistorical, functional or in some sense authentic as they had often been portrayed to be. If New Guinea societies could adopt such radical innovations as the sweet potato prior to colonial contact, was it reasonable to argue that a Melanesian group which had proved to be entrepreneurially adept at harnessing the possibilities of high coffee prices was necessarily less traditional or authentic than the group which was better known as reacting to new possibilities through cargo cults? Given this broad context, however, it is becoming clear that questions about the meaning of artefacts are increasingly tied up with larger issues about whether

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the world is literally becoming more or less meaningful, and about how far artefacts marketed with a homogenizing global meaning are given specific local meanings in the contexts in which they are consumed (e.g. Miller 1992).

THE MATERIALITY OF ARTEFACTS

The importance of considering the materiality and specificity of the world of artefacts should now be clear. A discussion of the way in which we order things and are in turn ordered by things certainly makes 'things' sound very orderly. In practice, however, artefacts may relate more to a multiplicity of meanings and identities, and the relations between form and meaning may be complex and ambiguous. The ingenuity displayed by human societies in investing the world with meaning is one of the abiding lessons of anthropology, and it is very difficult therefore to insist that artefacts always *do* this or *are* that. It is, however, possible to argue that objects, by their nature, tend to lend themselves to certain kinds of cultural appropriation. In constructing such an argument around the intrinsic potential of artefacts, their very physicality must play a major part.

The specificity of artefacts is considered here first by way of a critical account of that approach which centres on the meaning of artefacts in the narrower sense based on an analogy with language. From this there follows a concern with the differences between the artefactual and linguistic domains. While in linguistics the study of semantics (reference) and syntax (grammar) has tended to predominate over the study of pragmatics (context), we may expect an anthropological approach which is sensitive to the relativity of context to emphasize pragmatics.

We have already seen that approaches to material culture have often been profoundly influenced by ideas derived from the study of language. Both structuralist techniques for examining the internal relations and oppositions between objects, understood as parts of relatively closed systems, and the complementary techniques of semiotics which examine the reference of objects as signs, have been applied to artefacts. To make the analogy with language work, however, artefacts have tended to be detached from their physical nature and functional context and to be treated as relatively arbitrary signs formed through the application of contrast, making them potential meaningful units which could then be combined to produce something resembling a text. The influence of linguistics continues in the framework of trends in post-structuralist analysis, which has tended to focus upon the hidden agenda of messages, the dominant myths which are promulgated through language. Influential writers in this tradition, from Barthes (1973) to Baudrillard (1981), have emphasized the use of mundane artefacts as carriers of these myths, which they have seen it as their task to expose to scrutiny.

The linguistic analogy has proved very fruitful in demonstrating the symbolic malleability and power of artefacts, but it also has its limitations.

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Artefacts are not words, and the differences between them may provide further clues as to what artefacts really are. Langer long ago pointed out (1942:90–3) that language always works through sequences of sounds, and that as examples of what she called 'discursive' forms, linguistic utterances *unfold* as meaning. By contrast, objects are typically what she termed 'presentational' forms—that is, they present themselves with all their aspects at one time. Compared with words, artefacts much less often have clear propositional content, and the patterns and distinctions found may not necessarily correspond to units of meaning. Although certain anthropologists have claimed to be able to reveal grammar-like structures in objects, these are generally much looser and do not have the same necessity as grammar in language. Clearly objects relate to wider perceptual functions than do words. Remarkably subtle distinctions can be evoked through smell, taste, touch and most especially sight; by comparison, language may appear as a clumsy vehicle for the conveyance of difference. Try to describe in words the difference in smell between two kinds of fish, or the shape of two different shirts! This subtlety can also be seen in the extremes of personal identification. The problem of choosing between hundreds of pairs of shoes is most often caused less because we are spoilt for choice, and more because of the extraordinary feeling that despite the diversity not one of these pairs is quite right for us. To recall such a familiar experience helps us to acknowledge the subtleties in the way we differentiate between objects as meaningful forms and so to resolve the anthropological puzzle of why, say, one particular representation of a crocodile was an acceptable totemic representation while another, apparently almost identical to the first, had to be discarded.

The central difference lies, in the physicality of objects, however. Earlier (p. 398) it was suggested there is little to be gained through attempting to impose a rigorous distinction between the artefactual world and the natural world; later on (p. 403) it was suggested that objects operate with particular effectiveness as ideology, making the taxonomic orders of a particular culture appear to the individual as second nature. These two observations are clearly connected. Objects often appear as more 'natural' than words, in that we come across them in the main as already existing things, unlike at least spoken language, which is produced in front of us. This quality of artefacts helps, as it were, to entrance us, to cause us to forget that they are indeed artefacts, embodiments of cultural codes, rather than simply the natural environment within which we live. Artefacts and their physicality tend to become implicated in a wide variety of similar ambiguities. In English there is a strong sense of instrumental function, and it is commonly by their functions that artefacts are semantically labelled—e.g. 'frying pan' or 'hammer'. Nevertheless, for most ordinary artefacts it is extremely difficult to determine any clear boundary between functionally based and purely decorative aspects of form (see Wynn's discussion of this problem in Article 6). Most pots have as their functional role the act of containing some substance, but the diversity of shape is only relatively loosely related to the

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range of needs for particular kinds of containment (Miller 1985:51–74). If decoration communicates symbolically, can this be said to be its function? This ambiguity reinforces that between the natural and the artefactual, because the relation between form and function is generally taken to be 'natural', while other elements of form are more evidently expressive of a deliberate ordering. In all such cases, objects appear to orient us in the world, but in a way that remains largely implicit.

In a sense artefacts have a certain 'humility' in that they are reticent about revealing their power to determine what is socially conceivable. Curiously, it is precisely their physicality which makes them at once so concrete and evident, but at the same time causes them to be assimilated into unconscious and unquestioned knowledge. When viewing a work of art, it is often the frame which determines our perception of the quality of the content (that is, it cues us in to the fact that we are about to have an aesthetic experience), when the contained item, left to itself, might well have failed to evoke the 'proper' response. In a similar fashion, 'subtle' cosmetics are intended to enhance the attractiveness of the face without drawing attention to themselves. Thus artefacts may be most effective in determining our perception when they express a sense of humility in which they avoid becoming the direct focus of our attention. Many artefacts, whether house decorations or daily clothing, incline to this position on the borders of our perception rather than, as with the picture itself, capturing the focus of our gaze. They most often attract our attention when we feel there is either something new or something wrong about them.

Ethnographic findings seem to have an almost perverse tendency to refute any generalization produced by anthropological theory. Clearly words are capable of having any of the effects and properties which have here been associated with objects. As Derrida's (1977) work has shown, the difference in relative physicality between written and oral language may be of enormous significance. Equally, objects may occupy almost any of the propositional niches utilized by words. Thus the argument presented above has to be seen as one of tendencies rather than absolutes. However, although a particular society may refuse to exploit a given potential, the physical properties of artefacts nevertheless lend themselves to their being used to construct this sense of a frame, which does not have to pass through consciousness in order constantly to reconstruct the context of our experience of the world.

THE SPECIFICITY OF ARTEFACTS

Apart from these general qualities of artefacts, which arise from their physical materiality, they also have many qualities which are important for understanding their specific place in particular social contexts. Each of these qualities may become a focus within material culture studies, but for purposes of illustration only one, that of temporality, is discussed in any detail here.

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Artefacts are manufactured objects which may reveal in their form the technology used, but may equally seek to hide it. Items such as craft products may be conspicuously hand-made to highlight the contrast with industrial goods; alternatively, the stoneworker may seek to emulate the prestige of the blacksmith by using techniques which are inefficient when applied to stone but create a similar style, which in that particular context underwrites status. Again the instrumental function of an object may be exploited symbolically, or buried under decorative ornament. Artefacts may establish an individualistic relation, as with the emblem of a ruler or the prized blue jeans of a teenager, or they may stand for a wider social group such as a nation state. An object may confer added prestige through its having been imported from a considerable distance, through being rare or made from a rare raw material. An object may derive its specific meaning as part of an emergent style or order, such as a particular ceramic style in ancient China or a style of cathedral building seen as quintessentially Gothic.

The point to bear in mind is that all of these potential symbolic elements are exploitations of the specific nature of artefacts, is, that they are manufactured, come from a particular place and are used in particular ways. Size itself can be expressive, as in monumentality or, at the other extreme, in the concept of the 'petite', where small is also feminine. The vast symbolic potential to be drawn from exploiting the attributes of things is limited only by the ingenuity of a particular social group. In order to provide more substantial illustration of this symbolic potential and the resourcefulness of cultures in exploiting it, I now turn, in what follows, to consider the temporality of artefacts. Temporality is intrinsic to objects in the sense that there is always a period of time between their creation and the moment they are being considered, but this temporal quality may be either entirely inconsequential or, as with an heirloom, the element which endows the object with meaning.

THINGS, PERSONS AND TIME

To examine the relationship between the meaning of artefacts and temporality, three situations will be explored. In the first, the artefact, or at least that which the artefact represents, outlasts persons and thus becomes the vehicle by which persons attempt to transcend their own temporal limits. In the second situation there is some temporal equivalence between persons and artefacts which tends to give rise to issues of representation. In the third, artefacts are regarded as relatively ephemeral compared with persons, and the focus is then on the manner in which identity is carried along by the flood of transforming things. By drawing examples from various cultural contexts I do not mean to suggest their likeness; on the contrary, what is revealed is the very diverse manner in which the same relation between time and artefact is constructed and used in the manifold contexts of different human groups.

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Longevity

All people initially experience the world as something given by history rather than something they create. The child struggles to control, often vicariously through play, at least some elements of the encountered world, but this desire is constantly frustrated by ever-expanding vistas of the massiveness of this already created world. Among the items encountered are those which children may be taught to treat with special respect because they are icons of identity, commonly tokens of the longevity of their culture and of cross-generational continuity—a heritage which must never be lost because it has always existed. For example, in many Australian Aboriginal groups the male youth is presented at puberty with the sacred objects which have come down from the ancestors of the Dreamtime (the period in which the world was first created). The identity of an Indian peasant may be focused upon a piece of land that has been owned by the family for generations. The Jew may be constantly reminded of ritual knowledge enshrined in books which only exist because each generation has maintained them in the face of persecution. In all such cases the mere fact of the previous existence of things confers responsibility at the same moment that it bestows identity. Just as persons know themselves through identification with their clan totem or with the boundary stones of their land, so it is now their duty to ensure preservation through to the next generation.

Monuments are, in general, very large material forms built specifically to embody such a notion of transcending the generations—for example to symbolize the enduring nature of a 'thousand-year Reich'. But the same notion may equally be embodied in a simple ancestral shrine. Such objects may also fix the corporate entity on which identity and responsibility should fall. In the case of a national monument such as the Eiffel Tower, it is the nation state; in the case of the burial place of a deceased relative established through geomancy, future connections are determined by specific genealogical rules. With monuments it is the quality of size which is exploited, with burials it is spatial fixity. It need not be the case that these are ideological notions foisted by small élites on the population at large; the enormous heritage industry which has developed in most industrial societies includes countless small local museums or historical shrines to industrialization, as well as engaging many groups from all classes of society in archaeological excavations amounting to a collective act of self-consecration. This does presuppose, however, that a historical identity has already been established and rendered conventional.

An irony of this process is that whereas the material objects may actually transcend the generations, the corporate groups with which they are associated are themselves likely to change. Stonehenge is now a symbol of Britain, but was probably established initially by some tribal grouping in the Wessex region, and in the intervening period has undergone many changes in its symbolic appeal. Different groups may struggle over who built Great Zimbabwe, or who should retain the Elgin marbles from the Parthenon, aware that there is much more at

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stake than simple historical veracity or quality of conservation. Both Constantinople and Rome have been fought over at different historical periods for their ability to confer imperial legitimacy, and the Saudi authorities who possess Mecca spatially may nevertheless find themselves confronted by conflicting spiritual claims from, for example, the Iranian *haj*. On a smaller scale, disputes may arise over access by different castes to a village temple in India. Such conflict becomes particularly poignant in the conflicting claims to rights over cemeteries lodged by archaeologists and the descendants of those buried therein. The former try to incorporate the dead in the collective heritage, the latter treat them as their specific ancestral legacy.

Weiner (1985) has noted that for Polynesian peoples such as the Maori there may develop a special category of objects termed *taonga*, which are rendered inalienable precisely because they come to evoke the ancestral past. For example, items made of nephrite may come to have individual names and 'biographies' which are held to bear witness to events at which they were present, or to owners who are now deceased (1985:217–18). She refers to the case of a nephrite adze which was lost for seven generations but recognized on its rediscovery in 1877 when the stories associated with it were retold. Such valuables are often imbued with special meaning by virtue of the rich symbolic nexus which ties in their semantic or decorative properties with cosmological ideas relating to such events as birth, death and renewal.

Temporal identity

The second form of relationship between artefacts and persons is derived from a temporal equivalence in which objects stand for the particular states of persons at that time, so that a change in the material attributes of the person is indicative of a change in the person him- or herself. This is the relationship which commonly most concerns anthropologists, because their technique of participant observation tends to freeze the relationship between persons and artefacts in one frame of time, within which the logic of the relationship may be studied. For example, the project of Mass Observation led by the anthropologist Tom Harrison attempted to study and characterize Britain in the years before the Second World War. In one of the best-known studies the team attempted to deal with that key British institution, the pub, in Worktown. The interest was not directly in material culture but in understanding class, and the social implications of the pub as an institution. However, in order to accomplish this task a further element of material culture, clothing, became a key index. Considerable effort went into the differentiation of caps, bowler hats, ties, and so forth, and many statements fix the sociological variables in sartorial form; for example: 'caps are a working class badge, scarves around the neck instead of collar and tie usually indicate middle and lower (unskilled and semi-skilled) working class—but they are not necessarily invariable indications' (Mass Observation 1987:144).

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So we are informed that for their clientele of beerhouse vaults between weeknight and Saturday, the proportion of caps goes down from 92 to 80 per cent while that of bowlers goes up from 0 to 6 per cent. This is set against the observation that, contrary to expectations, Sundays show less of a move to respectable clothing than Saturdays. This, in turn, starts a chain of analysis leading to an important discussion of the relationship between the place of religion and of drinking for the inhabitants of the town (1987:140–67), according to which a change in an individual's dress sense becomes the instrument for signifying a desire to change his or her social position.

Similarly, in the anthropology of South Asia the focus of most ethnographic attention has been the institution of caste, and initially the study of food preparation, transaction and ingestion was developed simply because it seemed to provide the best set of indicators for an 'objective' study of caste hierarchy that would complement verbal accounts. It was argued that if you examined who actually accepted particular kinds of food from whom, then this would provide a picture of caste hierarchy in practice. Increasingly, however, it was appreciated that—partly because Hinduism has a much more sustained philosophy of the direct relationship between that which is ingested and the resultant qualities of the person ingesting—the study of food has to become integral to the understanding of caste as much more than a simple system of sociological categorization. A classification is not just made manifest through its correlation with material forms, but the experience of a particular identity and sense of being is created through the very sensual qualities involved in preparing and ingesting foodstuffs (compare Marriot 1968 with Marriot 1976). In moving from meaning to the meaningful, from cognitive to sensual expression, what is involved is not only the anthropological task of 'translating' another culture through widening the power of evocation, but a more profound appreciation of the manner by which culture reveals itself as a constitutive process.

Since my concern in this section is neither with the longevity nor with the transience of artefacts, but rather with their ability to relate to the larger cultural project of the moment, it is appropriate to consider the possibility of using changes in the materials as a means of investigating cultural change. Shanks and Tilley (1986:172–240), for example, have investigated the different approaches taken to alcoholism by the Swedish and British states, as indicated in the designs of beer cans. Their work exemplifies an emphasis on the precise forms of the material artefacts themselves, which are then related to the wider contexts of their production. One hundred and twenty beer cans, half from each country, were subjected to a formidable analysis including 45 variables such as forms of lettering or whether or not there was a design band around the top of the can. Detailed accounts were then provided of representational designs, names and other features on the can, and these in turn were related to a systematic analysis of advertisements, articles in newspapers about alcoholism, and so forth. Overall the differences in design and the manner in which alcohol

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is marketed were related to the distinction traced by the authors over the last century according to which the Swedish state has tended to take a more interventionist stance influenced by earlier prohibitionist tendencies, which, as Shanks and Tilley put it (following Foucault), were linked to a desire to discipline its population (1986:191–8). In Britain, by contrast, the state took a more *laissez-faire* but also more fiscally minded approach, emphasizing the possibilities for raising income through taxation.

Shanks and Tilley's work is directed to archaeologists, who are as much concerned as are anthropologists with questions of the meaning of artefacts. The task of the archaeologist is to reconstruct past societies on the basis of their material remains, and this in turn must depend a good deal on how the relationship between persons and artefacts is understood. In the past the tendency has been to invert the social—anthropological bias by making persons merely representations of the movements of things. Thus prehistorians documented such movements as 'the invasion of the black burnished pottery folk', or the rise of the 'jade axe peoples'. This was eventually opened out to encompass a more general concern with reconstructing the internal structure of ancient societies. Often the key sources of information for this were burials. If the grave goods buried with the deceased were highly differentiated, the society was supposed to be hierarchical; if less differentiated, it was supposed to be egalitarian. If one brooch signalled a commoner and two brooches a chief, then three brooches indicated a regional lord.

The problem with this approach may be clarified by means of a contemporary analogy. British society today includes vast differences in wealth and social status, but this would certainly not be evident from a visit to the cemeteries, where gravestones are used to express a belief about equality in death and where the most common concern of mourners is to avoid ostentation. Archaeologists are thus increasingly coming to realize that their interpretations of the nature of ancient societies are dependent upon developing a more sophisticated and less mechanical approach to the meaning of the artefacts which they uncover (e.g. Hodder 1986).

Transience

Transience, as also longevity, is a potential property of the relationship between persons and things, but its cultural significance may vary considerably. It is usually assumed that a concern with the ephemeral nature of artefacts is a peculiar condition of modernity, but, as with most other characteristics of being modern, there is no a priori reason to suppose that there are not, or have not been, other societies which have focused upon this quality of objects as having profound implications for the nature of their world. Kuechler (1988) has pointed out, with respect to the Malangan wooden funerary carvings of New Ireland, that although these are now incorporated as art objects in museums around the world, the major consideration in their original use in

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rituals associated with death was that they would rot away, and in this context even the smells associated with this process of deterioration were of central importance in the cosmology of the people concerned.

On the island of Trinidad certain sections of the community are generally regarded as having a particular penchant for style (Miller, in press). Considerable effort and expense may be directed towards originality in constructing effective displays. Here it is the very transient quality of industrial goods which is the focus of concern. Although international fashions are exploited, the mere following of fashion is left to the more conservative elements in the community, since style demands a more creative appropriation and juxtaposition of items. Individuals involved in this pursuit of style are often also characterized as reacting against those institutional and structural mechanisms which would otherwise place them in more stable and more hierarchical frameworks. There may be an unwillingness to associate closely with any occupation or social role. Many of the familiar structural forms of kinship may be denied, for example through recognizing little sense of obligation towards persons simply on the basis of some genealogical connection, preferring pragmatic and dyadic forms of social association.

The use of material culture in transitory modes in which no lasting or affective relationship is built up with any particular objects is clearly related to the search for autonomy and independence in these other arenas. The particular mode may well be related to a strongly expressed concern for freedom whose historical roots may go back to the experience of slavery and indentured labour of the ancestors of many of those concerned. It has certainly been affected by the rise of industrialization and mass consumption, in this case paid for largely by profits from an oil-based economy. Indeed, mass consumption may be taking over from kinship as the main vehicle by which this historical project of freedom may be objectified.

In such circumstances there are considerable advantages to be gained from moving away from a medium such as kinship where transience is generally condemned by those whose models of proper family relations are developed elsewhere. By concentrating instead on the medium of fashion, the sense of style which is created may be positively expressed and blessed by international canons which favour creativity in this expressive field. Thus what locally may be the same cultural project, that is of creating an experience of transience as freedom, is either condemned or envied, depending upon whether a social or a material medium is used to express it. Style, far from being superficial, has here become the central instrument by which identity is constructed without its being made subservient to social institutional structures. Within the same society there is an opposing tendency associated with highly structured kinship and emphasis on intergenerational continuity. In this case the accumulation of property and goods, and the control over resources which goes with it, is seen to provide an alternative route to freedom from control by others, and thereby to emancipation.

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An analysis such as that presented above assumes that people are able to appropriate and transform the products of international manufacture, in this case largely because tendencies in economic development happen to have been pre-empted by tendencies in the development of local culture. In many other contexts it seems that the capacity of transience to demolish received structures is not matched by the possibilities of appropriation, and the result is closer to the experience of alienation so often observed in the rise and spread of mass and transient material culture. Unfortunately, anthropologists have so far paid very little attention to the analysis of industrial material culture and mass consumption, and the articulation between macro-economic shifts and the local elaboration of cultural projects is little understood. Such issues are of considerable importance today, particularly because it is becoming increasingly evident that in much of the developing world, expenditure patterns have moved swiftly towards prioritizing objects such as televisions and new forms of clothing, often at the expense of those priorities proposed by international agencies, such as achieving adequate levels of nutrition and shelter. We are nowadays confronted with images of decaying slums festooned with cars and television aerials.

EMBODIMENT AND OBJECTIFICATION: AGAINST A DUALISM OF ARTEFACTS AND PERSONS

So far in this article we have considered the idea that the meaning of artefacts goes beyond the narrow cognitive questions of sense and reference, we have examined the dialectical interplay between ordering objects and being ordered by them, we have explored the implications of their physicality and their differences from the words of language, and we have discussed their symbolic qualities in regard to the factor of time. To conclude, I now lift the argument onto a slightly more abstract level to challenge the most basic of the assumptions underwriting consideration of these questions: that we are dealing with the relations between two quite separate kinds of entities, namely persons and things.

For a long time anthropologists have assumed that a pristine level of 'social relations' furnishes the authentic foundation for what they are supposed to be studying. The theoretical rationale for this approach was provided by Durkheim, and the study of kinship provided its ethnographic substance. Thus whatever cultural domain was being investigated was ultimately treated as symbolic of underlying social relations. The meanings of artefacts were always seen to lie in their positioning within such symbolic systems. When the term 'constituting' became fashionable in the literature, it seemed to grant a more active role to these cultural forms than the more passive-sounding notion of 'symbolizing', and this reflected a move from a simple 'social' anthropology towards a sense of 'cultural' anthropology in which social forms are created by the same media that express them. An example of this approach was presented

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in the previous section, where the use of fashion was seen to be in some sense equivalent to kinship in expressing and constructing a historically situated cultural project. Recently, further attempts have been made to erode the asymmetry in the relationship between social relations and cultural forms.

In theoretical writings which have come to be known as 'post-modernist' or 'post-structuralist' (e.g. Foucault 1970) the demise of this act of reference to social relations was in one sense welcomed, since it was suggested that the idea of a pure humanity or individual person was a fiction of relatively recent times which virtually deified the human in order to fill the void left by a secular rejection of the divine (e.g. Barthes 1977:142–8, Foucault 1977:113–18). However, the trend was also seen as a negative one in that it was said to reflect a new era of mass commodities in which objects refer mainly to lifestyles comprising the association with other sets of objects, and have lost the ability to relate 'authentically' to any cultural project (e.g. Baudrillard 1981).

One area in which anthropologists have been most effective in establishing an image of culture which is not based on a dualistic opposition of persons and artefacts is in the literature on gifts and gift exchange, as established originally by Mauss and subsequently developed mainly in writings on Melanesia and the Pacific (see Article 33). In his essay of 1925 on *The Gift,* Mauss (1954) argued that the gift had to be returned because it carried with it a sense of the inalienable—that is, something which could never really be given away. This something involved, among other elements, the sense that the object retained attributes of the person by whom it was given, and, furthermore, the object was seen to embody a relationship which exists between persons by virtue of their mutual obligation to give and return gifts. This also helped to account for the observation that persons might be exchanged as gifts in a manner which did not diminish their sense of humanity or value, since to be so exchanged (as, for example, with the 'gift' of a bride in marriage) is not to be reduced to some less exalted, thing-like status. In recent anthropological literature, especially on Melanesian societies, the subtleties of such processes have been much further elaborated (e.g. Strathern 1988).

Unfortunately, Mauss also established a means by which this new understanding could be incorporated into a romantic primitivism, according to which small-scale societies could be seen as having a totalizing vision which repudiates any simple distinction between persons and things. These societies were then contrasted with those which were based on commodity exchange and which, following Marx, were seen to have gone to the other extreme in not only creating this fundamental dualism but also establishing institutions in which persons achieve a sense of humanity only to lose it through being reduced to thing-like status.

As I noted at the beginning of this article (pp. 396–7), these concerns have been paramount in establishing the framework within which scholars have considered the question of the meaning of artefacts. For example, Durkheim's writings on—and concern with—mass consumption (Williams 1982:322–42)

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help us to understand why he developed a 'social' rather than a 'cultural' approach. This may also explain why anthropologists, who have successfully elucidated how objects like canoes or spears may be caught up in complex networks of symbolic meaning connecting diverse domains within small-scale societies, nevertheless tend to join the post-modernists in dismissing the possibility of a similarly complex exegesis of industrial artefacts.

There have, however, been some recent attempts to soften this dualism between persons and objects, or between gifts and commodities. Appadurai (1986:3–63), for example, has attempted to do this by examining the literature on exchange, while Miller (1987) explores the manner in which the notion of objectification might be used to overcome a dualistic or reductionist approach to material culture. Ironically, while writers on post-modernism discover that artefacts no longer seem to make reference to 'people', this may in part be because commodities as well as gifts have the capacity to construct cultural projects wherein there is no simple dichotomy between things and persons. Indeed, anthropologists have exaggerated the totalizing holism of small-scale social groups, often ignoring contradictions and feelings of alienation, while on the other hand failing to see the strategies by which people in industrial societies attempt to appropriate their own material culture.

It may be preferable in all cases to resist the assumption, which is given in the experience of ethnography, that we are dealing with an already established set of objects whose social meaning has to be (retrospectively) determined. For, in reality, such objects only come into being through prior acts of construction, and in the process of their manufacture they manifest a particular system of categorization. Likewise, persons only come into being, with the particular cultural identities that they have, through a process of socialization involving these same material taxonomies. The process does not stop with socialization, however, for material forms remain as one of the key media through which people conduct their constant struggles over identity and confront the contradictions and ambiguities that face them in their daily lives. To go beyond a dualistic approach means recognizing that the continual process by which meaning is given to things is the same process by which meaning is given to lives.

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